

JULIAN ROHRHUBER

New Mathematics and the Subject of the Variable¹

Mathematics is like a big city, whose outlying districts and suburbs encroach incessantly, and in a somewhat chaotic manner, on the surrounding countryside; the centre is rebuilt from time to time, each time in accordance with a more clearly conceived plan and a more majestic order, tearing down the old sections with their labyrinths of alleys, and projecting towards the periphery new avenues, which are more direct, broader, and more commodious.

*Nicolas Bourbaki*²

1971 Set theory is introduced to the school curriculum, which initially causes considerable concern among parents.

*Chronicle of Sahlenburg Primary School*³

1975 The sharply declining birth rate and the introduction of set theory, which requires that classes are composed of children of the same age group, led to the closure of the school.

*Dahlenfeld Primary School near Heilbronn*⁴

Mathematics is a school subject that frequently triggers anxiety—at least in western Europe. It is certainly not a coincidence that Zoltan P. Dienes, one of the protagonists of the reform programme New Mathematics, began his study *Concept Formation and Personality* (1959) by referring to this odd phenomenon: “It seems a very curious thing, upon some reflection, that Mathematics, the

1 With grateful thanks to Maarten Bullynck, Renate Wieser, Elizabeth de Mol, Arianna Borrelli, and Jin Hyun Kim, as well as Alberto de Campo and Echo Ho, to whom I owe many essential and stimulating suggestions for this text.

2 Nicolas Bourbaki, *The architecture of mathematics*, trans. Arthur Dresden. *American Mathematical Monthly* 57 (1950): 230.

3 <http://www.grundschule-sahlenburg.de/chronik.htm>.

4 http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~herz/dahenfeld/dah_history.htm.